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ABSTRACT

This paper was written in response to an article entitled "Defining the Social Studies: An Explanation of the Three Traditions" by James L. Barth and S. Samuel Shermis. The three positions portray social studies as citizenship transmission; as social science; and as reflective inquiry. These authors favor the latter position, defined as a process of decision making as to significant social problems perceived by students to be of considerable concern to them. An alternative position is proposed in this paper, namely, that the structure of economics should be an important organizing vehicle in the social studies and presents a case for a fourth tradition. The structure of a discipline should be defined as the interrelationships of its important concepts and the concepts of science as a tool for repetitive assistance to a reflective inquirer. Problems for inquiry must be selected and organized so as to lead to an understanding of such a structure. The paper concludes with a further detailing of the case for economics education, pointing out the essential nature of the need for more citizens to understand and apply economic concepts in individual, business, political, and societal matters. (Author/SJM)

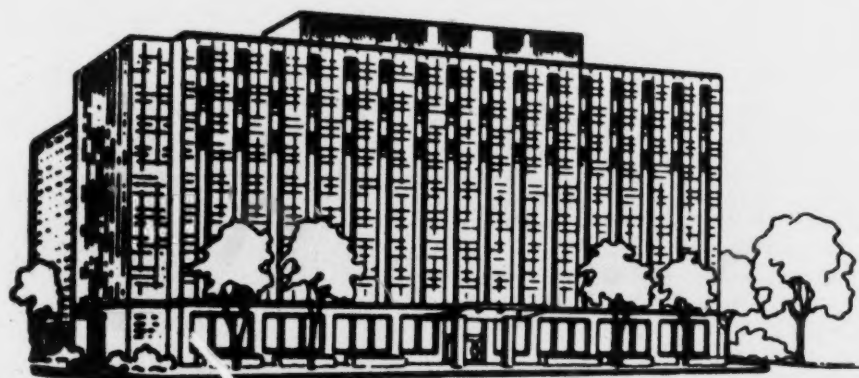
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A PLEA FOR A FOURTH TRADITION
- AND FOR ECONOMICS

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Robert V. Horton*

In the editorial preface to the article "Defining the Social Studies: An Exploration of Three Traditions," by James L. Barth and S. Samuel Shermis, which appeared in the November 1970 issue of Social Education (pp. 743-751), readers are asked: Where do you stand? Which of the three positions is closest to your own: social studies as citizenship transmission; social studies as social science; or social studies as reflective inquiry?

Professors Barth and Shermis¹ present an informative and cogent plea for conceptual clarity in choosing what the social studies should be (p. 751), for identification of the premises underlying that choice (p. 751), and for definition (p. 743). A reading between the lines in the light of further knowledge of their views suggests that their own highly-favored choice would be for student involvement and for social studies as reflective inquiry. All of these B and S views are fully accepted here, in the belief that they promise both more meaningful education and better learning.

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This paper has benefited from suggestions of associates at Purdue University: Professors Dennis J. Weidenaar and Peter V. Harrington of the Krannert School and Professors James L. Barth and S. Samuel Shermis of the Department of Education. Unfortunately, nevertheless, it is to be presumed that they do not unanimously concur with all that is here presented.

¹Hereinafter "B and S", with page numbers in parentheses within the text of this paper referring to page numbers in their article.

Reflective inquiry, identified by B and S as the process of decision making as to significant social problems perceived by students to be of considerable concern to them (pp. 748-9), or as the sensing and identifying of significant problems and the serious and consecutive search for satisfactory answers (p. 743), is thus to be preferred to the other two traditions. Reflective inquiry should, in this writer's view, be the primary organizer in the social studies, and it should therefore take precedence, in a significant sense, over course content as ordinarily conceived.

But is an absolute purity of approach - just from among these three traditions - either essential or even desirable? Were our predecessors entirely lacking in wisdom in their alternative approaches to the social studies? More constructively, perhaps, might we not ask if it is not possible to achieve conceptual clarity, identification of premises, definition, and student involvement on a basis different from any of the three specified by B and S, a basis which might be even more valuable to our students? Might we not create an even more persuasive fourth tradition?

This particular response to B and S has an important, but much more restricted, purpose, although hopefully it may also contribute to the building of such a promising fourth tradition. The purpose here is solely to argue that in the realm of economics, at least, as a part of the social studies the B and S conclusion is inadequate. This paper therefore suggests as an alternative that the structure of economics (or of other social sciences), defined differently than by B and S (p. 748), should also be an important collateral, organizing vehicle in the social

studies. With its purpose thus limited, this paper ignores whatever arguments may be made for social studies as citizenship transmission and whatever arguments similar to those made here in the case of economics may also be made for other sciences. It is not denied that some such arguments may have substance, although it may well be that the argument in the case of economics is both the most persuasive and the most far reaching.

This paper, then, now proceeds to present the case for such a fourth tradition, using on occasion illustrations from the field of economics. It concludes with a further detailing of the case for economics education, organized as reflective inquiry in the B and S sense, but with regard, too, to the structure of economics, defined differently than by B and S and so as to mean the important concepts of the science, and their interrelationships, for repetitive assistance to the reflective inquirer.

The Case for a Future Fourth Tradition

Teaching social studies as social science is described by B and S in their article (p. 746) as transmitting to the young in a simplified version a body of knowledge created by social scientists. The purpose in this tradition is stated (p. 747) as simply to acquire knowledge, a purpose claimed by its advocates to be both self-justifying and self-validating. It is to teach the structure of knowledge of a particular discipline -- to make the student, for example, a junior historian or a quasi-political scientist (pp. 747-748).

No doubt such purposes have been a tradition in the social studies, and economists have themselves been contributors to it. But that is not the whole story. Lawrence Senesh, for example, must have been shocked to read that such have been his purposes in his Our Working World² publications for the elementary schools, much as he has emphasized in his work the structures of knowledge of the various social sciences. The 1963-64 Resource Unit for Our Working World in its opening "Overview of the Program" (p. 1) emphasizes, on the contrary, the child's desire for answers to his questions, the confusion created by dumping quantities of unrelated information upon him, and the importance of his discovery of the relation between events and ideas, so that, of all things, he will enjoy inquiry! (The emphasis is added.) There is obviously something quite different here from what B and S describe as the tradition of social studies as social science.

Not only the Senesh materials, but many others also, are not directed to the goal of knowledge for its own sake nor of teaching the mode of inquiry of the various social sciences (as B and S claim, pp. 747-748). On the contrary, these materials recognize the need to identify problems of interest and significance to the learner, to apply much of the reflective inquiry process so well delineated by B and S, to aid the learner to distinguish value judgments from science, and to aid him to reach more rational choices as to these problems.

²Lawrence Senesh, Our Working World: Families at Work (1964), Neighbors at Work (1965), and Cities at Work (1966, 1967), with their respective Resource Units (1963, 1964), (1965), and (1966, 1967) (Chicago: Science Research Associates).

Their creators may, however, believe, contrary to B and S, that in pursuing social studies as reflective inquiry the simpler, important findings of the social sciences must nevertheless be included as essential elements.³ This would not be for the purpose of teaching the structures themselves of the social sciences, nor of their methods of inquiry, in the B and S sense, but for the purpose of providing tools, and an integrated approach, for better, or at least more rational, reflective inquiry. Why in the pursuit of reflective inquiry should the hard-earned, but well-established findings of social scientists which bear upon a problem be obscured? Such obscuration would itself impede the reflective inquiry, but more importantly the learning of tools, which at least in economics, have wide transfer applications to other problems. For this reason, such elements of a social science should be learned as tools by the student. He should, moreover, learn to recognize the applicability of a tool or tools to a problem and learn to make proper applications. Finally, he should learn to distinguish in his reflective inquiry the important differences between his and society's goals and values and the scientific findings of the discipline itself.

³Professor Shermis has orally referred to such an approach as "controlled inquiry," but he may have meant both more and less than is recommended in this paper. Both he and Professor Barth of course include the pertinent findings of the social sciences as data in a particular reflective inquiry, but there is no recognition by them, as this writer sees it, that structure as redefined here is an essential element, too, for effective social studies education. There are to B and S no particular findings of the sciences which are so basic that they must be learned. The result of such an approach could be likened to that from reflective inquiry in the field of mathematics if there were no learning there that in most circumstances two plus two is to be taken as equal to four, or better, that given a part and its proportion of the whole, one may determine the whole by division of the part by the proportion.

Another failing of the social studies as reflective inquiry in the B and S specification arises from their definition of structure of a discipline (p. 748) as its important concepts and the means by which inquirers gain knowledge about these concepts. For the creation of an even better fourth tradition, structure should, in contrast, be defined as the important concepts of science for repetitive assistance to a reflective inquirer.

Moreover, this "structure" should be interpreted more literally to include the interrelationships of these concepts within the discipline. Senesh⁴ has put great emphasis upon such interrelationships in establishing the structures of a number of the social sciences for his materials. Lovenstein⁵ has used different organizers, but still with the purpose of emphasizing interrelationships within the structure of economics.

Absent such organizers, a student could complete his social studies without any real understanding of the meaning of economics, at least. Its essence lies importantly in the interrelationship of the scarcities of resources relative to our wants and goals,⁶ as both Senesh and

⁴In addition to the Senesh materials themselves, see Irving Morrisett, Ed., Concepts and Structure in the New Social Science Curricula (West Lafayette, Ind.: Social Science Education Consortium, 1966).

⁵Meno Lovenstein et al., Development of Economics Curricular Materials for Secondary Schools (Columbus: The Ohio State University Research Foundation, 1966). His organizers (p. 41) are scarcity, flows, and systems.

⁶Lionel Robbins, An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science (London: Macmillan, 1962) even defines economics (p. 16) as "the science which studies human behavior as a relationship between ends (desires and goals) and scarce means (resources) which have alternative uses." (Parenthetical specifications are added.)

Lovenstein emphasize in their structures. The choice-making of reflective inquiry, so emphasized by B and S (pp. 748-749), would leave no problem for reflective inquiry as to the use of resources in a world which had no such scarcities.

The importance of this more literally interpreted structure can also be illustrated by pointing out that without an understanding of the flows of goods and services in an economic system, and the inter-related flows of money in the opposite direction, which Lovenstein emphasizes, the realities of any modern economic world might never be grasped by the student. This could remain true however often he may have applied economic concepts, supply and demand curves for example, in his reflective inquiry as to many problems. These examples illustrate why such a structure of economics, at least, must not be ignored in the social studies.

The fourth tradition, therefore, would require that the problems considered in reflective inquiry must be selected and organized so as to lead to an understanding of such a structure. It would not mean that such understanding would precede reflective inquiry. However, in contrast with the B and S interpretation (p. 744), there might be a set of sequential content and there would be a set of prescribed content, but all to be learned in reflective inquiry settings.

Such a structure as to the appropriate important concepts of a discipline also assists the student in learning both their importance and their meaning and in retaining what he learns. Meaningful

learning is not, as both Morrissett⁷ and B and S⁸ recognize, just a collection of unrelated bits of knowledge, but this conclusion argues not only for it to be relevant to a problem, as B and S recognize, or to various problems as noted above, but also for its organization, more literally, into a structure emphasizing interrelationships, in order to create better understanding and learning in the social studies.⁹

Perhaps B and S would continue to argue that such eclecticism from among their three traditions as is here suggested offends their requirement of conceptual clarity (p. 751) -- or even worse becomes "an indiscriminate mixing" of two of their three traditions (p. 751). But a rationale and general objectives for such a new tradition have been suggested above, and hopefully there results a "coherent theory" (which) does not come from (such) an indiscriminate mixing of -- traditions which define purpose, content, and method differently (B and S, p. 751).

⁷Morrissett, op, cit., pp. 4-5, e.g., includes the statement: "It is the essence of theory that it organizes and simplifies the profusion of facts in the world."

⁸"...information is simply facts unrelated to any purpose of (or?) context. Data, on the other hand, is ... whatever is needed to solve a problem." (Band S., p. 750).

⁹Jerome Bruner, The Process of Education (New York: Vintage Books, 1960). Morrissett, op. cit., pp. 5-6, sees as a major theme of that Bruner publication: "... education should make much greater use of the structure of a discipline," with a principle reason: "it simplifies the process of learning," and "in four ways: it makes a subject more comprehensible, it facilitates memory..., it contributes to transfer ..., and it facilitates intuitive thinking."

This quotation omits reference, of course, to the important questions discussed in this paper of what such a structure should be and of whether it merits learning by the student.

Senesh materials illustrate actual, successful applications of the position taken in this paper, on the basis of reflective inquiry and structures of knowledge of the various social sciences useful to the learner.

In summary, then, the suggested fourth tradition would be to redefine structure as the important concepts of science for repetitive assistance to a reflective inquirer, with emphasis upon the inter-relationships of such concepts, and then in settings of reflective inquiry by students, to arrange that such structure be learned.

But such efforts may not yet be able to achieve in the social studies all that has been implied above for an effective fourth tradition. Among other things excellent and constantly updated materials and teacher aids would be required -- as they would be also, however, for meaningful reflective inquiry as recommended by B and S. Even more critical, in both cases, would be the requirement that teachers be of quite exceptional abilities and training.

As a result, a specific course in reflective inquiry, but also in economics itself, may for many years still be required, even though, of course, problems in the real world do not appear as solely economic problems or solely problems in any other single social science. This paper, concludes, therefore, with a rationale as to why economics is important enough to justify such special attention, that is, to justify such special application to economics of time and resources, both of the learners and of the schools, notwithstanding the many demands upon them. This rationale may also illustrate and fortify some of the arguments just concluded for the future fourth tradition suggested.

The Special Case for Economics

Economic activities and decisions obviously occupy extremely large portions of our individual lives. We work, we acquire and sell property, we spend, we save, all in an economic world. Economics activities of others, occupying similarly large portions of their lives, surround us. Moreover, business firms, both small and gigantic, governments, and foreigners are all largely so engaged. We as individuals also share in forming social opinions and in making political decisions which ordinarily have a substantial economic content and almost never have none.

Without an understanding of economics, which considers these matters from a social point of view, we come to fear the economic world, just as our forefathers, not understanding, feared lightning and thunder. We may still fear lightning and thunder today, but somewhat less, because we have come to understand them, and we certainly do not make burnt offerings to the gods to escape their terrors -- we put up lightning rods!

With this lack of understanding of economics we develop funny opinions as to economic matters -- funny peculiar, that is, not funny ha-ha. And we do very peculiar, unwise things. Moreover, we participate in unwise decisions in the political arena where the economic aspects of these decisions are ordinarily so predominant.

We have these strange opinions and take these strange actions because we do not understand. As a result, the general social interest is not served either by many of our personal actions or by our political decisions. In political decisions we tend to accept the

common sense of the urgings of those strong minorities which have axes to grind. More generally, we tend to believe, for example, that if each of us had more money, we would each be better off -- a belief that is plain wrong, common sense though it may be.

For just this reason - our common sense leads us astray in economics - we need economics education. The fallacies of composition and of the incomplete argument wreak havoc in our common sense reasoning as to economic matters -- these fallacies even seem themselves to be common sense. Two further examples of illiteracy in economics should establish the point.

A few years back a poll was taken of public attitudes toward government programs. It showed, for example, that 70% of those polled thought the government should spend more for help for older people, but that the 70% fell to only 34%, if taxes were to be raised for the purpose¹⁰ -- a difference of 36%, or more than half. This result clearly establishes the economic illiteracy of the 36%, unless its members presumed that unemployment of resources existed at the time or they proposed inflation or the reduction of other governmental programs -- all very doubtful possibilities, it would seem. And so it seemed to another commentator, who said, "... this is the way to get some impression of how the citizenry evaluates benefits relative to costs."¹¹ Enough as to the economic illiteracy of the citizenry generally. How about that of one of our leaders of thought?

¹⁰Eva Miller, "Public Attitudes Toward Fiscal Programs." Quarterly Journal of Economics (May, 1963), p. 215.

¹¹Paul W. McCracken, "Tax Policy and Sustainable Economic Growth," in Proceedings of a Symposium on Federal Taxation (New York: The American Bankers Association, 1965), p. 20.

The New York Times of May 1, 1966, in an editorial, commented on the need for federal legislation to require manufacturers to observe safety standards in making automobiles. It said, "... projects such as a crashproof car are desirable. As for the concept of balancing costs versus benefits ... this seems a fallacious approach. How arrive at a true balance when human lives are at issue?¹² Does The New York Times mean that we should not prefer, for example, an alternative which at the same cost would save twice as many lives?

With these comments and illustrations it would seem that the need for training in economics is established and that structure, including such concepts as scarcity, choice, and inevitable costs, is a necessary tool to that end. Moreover, students should be trained to see economics in phenomena that are of concern to them and to apply simple economic analysis to help them reach more rational conclusions. As a specific matter, moreover, they should learn how the economic questions (What shall be produced? How shall it be produced? For whom shall it be produced? and How much shall be produced?) are answered in a market economy as well as in a command economy. This is the basic, inherent problem of any economic society, and it cannot be avoided, either now or in the future so long as relative scarcity may exist.

Nevertheless, the question may still be raised as to why economics, important as it may be, must be taught in the schools. The answer is

¹²Item used in John G. Maher, What is Economics? (New York: Wiley, 1969), p. 13.

clear. A large proportion (more than 90% about 1962) of our children finish eighth grade, and more than 65% then completed four years of high school. But only 43% went on to college; only 10% completed a four-year college course, and only one-quarter of this group studied economics.¹³ Obviously, even with any reasonably to be expected increases, only a small proportion of Americans will receive any systematic educational training in economics unless they receive it in their school years and before their college years. Economics may not have the claim upon school time and resources that does any of the three R's, but beyond them, for the reasons stated above, what other field of learning can approach economics in significance?

Let us no longer tolerate the often repeated remark that although the economic productivity of America may be the eighth wonder of the world, the ninth is surely how little Americans understand it.

¹³Economic Literacy for Americans (New York: The Committee for Economic Development, 1962), pp. 11-12.

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